

BY CLAYTON DEKORNE

Off the Grid

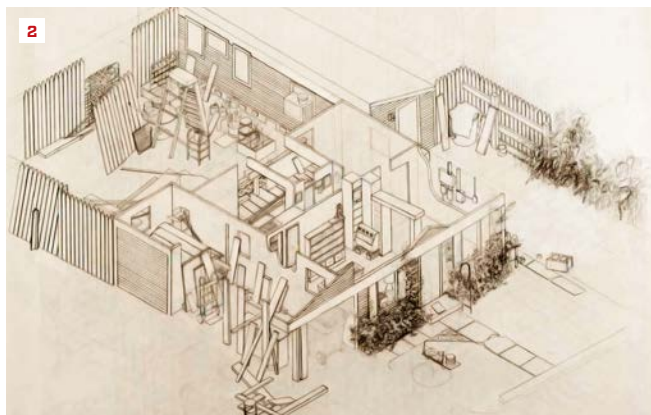
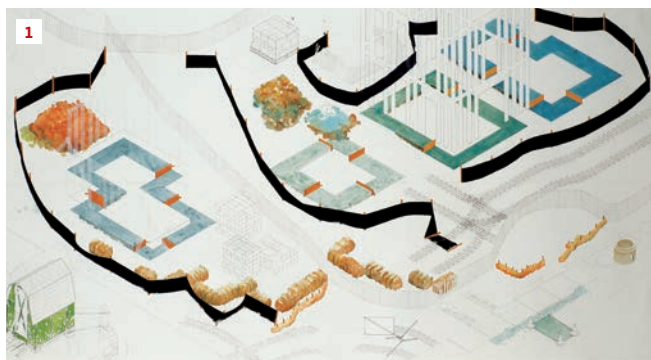
Trained originally as an urban planner and geographer, Owen Buffington has spent hours poring over maps, plat plans, and technical drawings. These idealized images, rendered against a grid of straight lines and right angles, are inseparable from the world in which we live. We rely on things accurately conforming to a grid in order to navigate, organize, and build our towns and cities. Yet real life—what we see in alleys and on jobsites, in particular—is a bit messier than the drawings we use to create those places, and it's this interplay between a world full of quirks and the flawless informational drawings we use to describe the world that intrigues Buffington.

In a recent exhibition at the University of Arkansas, Buffington offered representations of the back alleys and construction sites of Fayetteville, Ark., that he observed on his daily walks to and from work. He brings a draftsman's precision to these scenes, drawing them in an isometric perspective that gives the drawings a technical feel. But he scatters each drawing with casual details, and he seems to play with time, rendering some elements in ghostlike pencil lines to show materials and building elements from past and future phases of construction. Erased lines are intentionally left in place, underscoring that change is integral to real life. In one piece, black silt fences create a meandering calligraphy that follows the topography of the land, while stepped footings create tight geometric outlines (1). Together, these interwoven shapes suggest there are competing grid works in play. Yet it's what falls off the grid—piles of dirt or broken blocks, tire tracks, graffiti, and weeds—that most interests Buffington.

In one pencil drawing of a home, he jumbles disparate features: inside with outside, spaces under construction with occupied rooms, landscaping with furniture (2). The effect is strangely both serene and unsettling. It's M.C. Escher meets Eric Sloane in the modern world.

In a painting of two infill homes under construction, a rainscreen over Zip System sheathing documents the work of a savvy builder (3). Buffington succeeds in bringing a stateliness to the unfinished project. Indeed, his reverence for the evolving process of building, as well as the deterioration of the built environment, makes the body of work as a whole as gratifying to builders as it is to geographers and artists—those of us who often exist off the grid socially in a changing, messy world.

Clayton DeKorne is the editor of JLC.



Three works by Owen Buffington: South Street Construction Site (1); Fayetteville Home, Ward 1, Zone 2, Precinct 9 (2); Two New Southside Units (3). See more at owen-buffington.squarespace.com.